

BEHIND WOODEN DOORS

TEXT KALPANA SUNDER

A patio with a pool at the centre of a riad in Marrakesh, Morocco. A riad is known for the lush greenery that is intrinsic to its open-air courtyard, making it an oasis of peace.

Morocco hides its secrets well; who can imagine the splendour of a riad? Slip away from the hustle and bustle of aggressive street vendors and step into a cocoon of tranquillity.



AM IN THE lovely rose-pink Moroccan town of Marrakesh, on the fringes of the Sahara, and in true Moroccan spirit, I'm staying at a riad. Riads are traditional Moroccan homes with a central courtyard garden; in fact, the word *riad* is derived from the Arabic word for garden. They offer refuge from the clamour and sensory overload of the streets, as well as protection from the intense cold of the winter and fiery warmth of the summer. That evening, I have dinner on the terrace, which is perhaps the crown jewel of a riad. I look out at a sea

Above: View from the rooftop of a riad that lets you see all the way to the medina (the old walled part) of Marrakesh.

Below: A traditional fountain in the inner courtyard of a riad in Fez, Morocco's third largest city, brings a sense of coolness and calm.

of terracotta roofs and legions of satellite dishes. The minaret of the Koutoubia Mosque, the tallest building in the city, is silhouetted against a crimson sky; in the distance, the evocative sound of the muezzin called the faithful to prayer. With arched cloisters, pots of lush tangerine bougainvillea and tiled courtyards, this is indeed a visual feast.

WHAT LIES WITHIN

I hear that there are more than 1,400 riads around the town where large joint families of several generations used to live under one roof. The

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Martin Moxter/Westend61 RM/Diordia, James Dugan/Shutterstock.com

Interiors

restoration of the crumbling riads has saved entire medina neighbourhoods from falling into disuse and is a classic example of urban regeneration. The facade of a riad does not give any hint of the wonders within, in line with the basic Islamic philosophy of showing no ostentation. The design of a riad is also a reflection of the Muslim belief that the home is a private sanctuary—since women were generally not allowed outside the home alone, they could relax and enjoy the delights of a garden without compromising their modesty. This inward focus was demonstrated by the central location of most of the interior gardens and courtyards and in the lack of large windows on the exterior clay or mud brick walls.

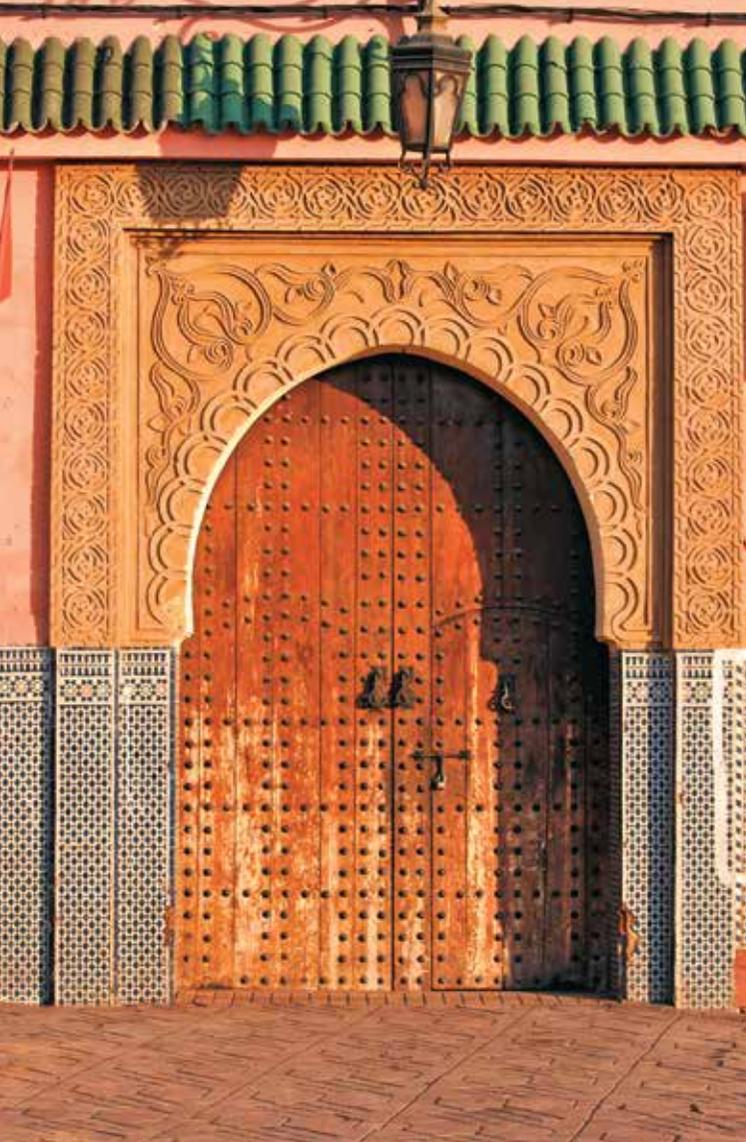
The exterior of a riad is a contradiction to its rich interiors. Each room is individually decorated—you will not find any cookie-cutter rooms here. The entrance opens into a modest sitting room called the *setwan*, and then leads to an open-to-the-sky courtyard set around the *sahridj*, a fountain or basin. The courtyard garden is often planted with bitter orange trees and the courtyard has built-in seating nooks called *bhous*. On the ground floor, elongated rooms, called *bayts*, line the courtyard and are usually used as salons and dining rooms. Tight winding staircases with dappled light lead to upper levels with open-columned galleries and



Above: A riad may have a small plunge pool in the open-air courtyard, allowing visitors to take a dip in the privacy of their surroundings for moments of quiet reflection.

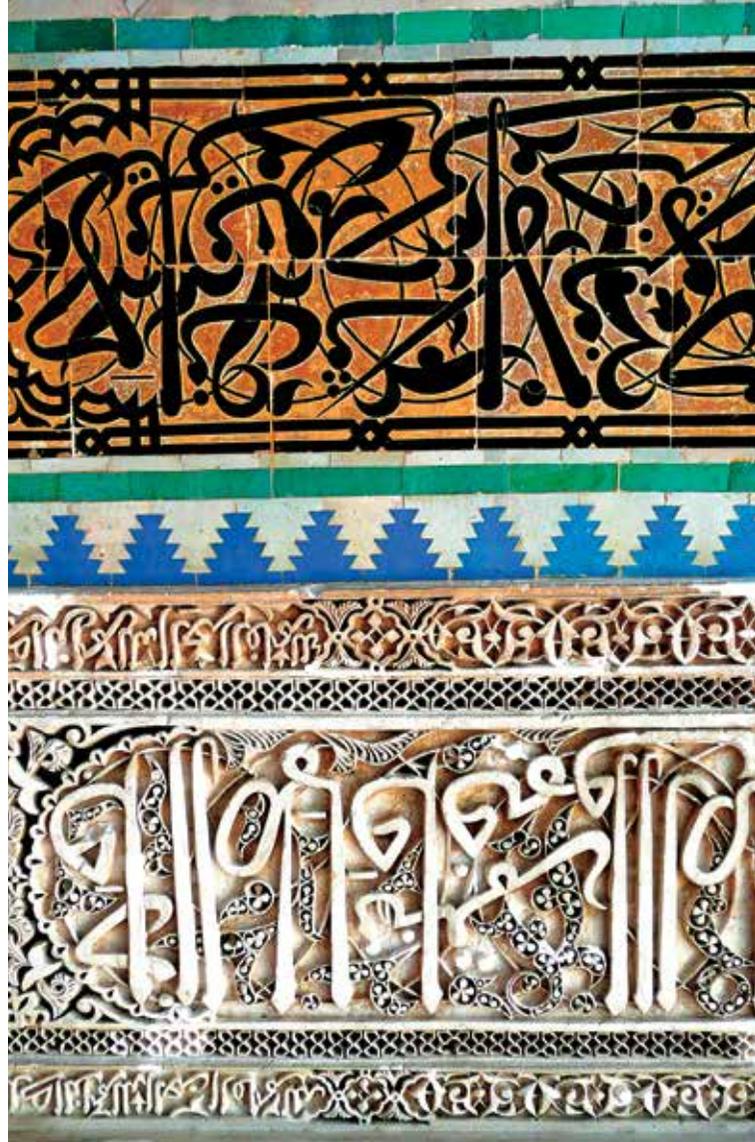
Below: A garden forms an integral part of any classic riad. This one, in the city of Tangier, Morocco, is complete with a central fountain, glazed ceramic tiles and lots of verdant foliage.





Above: Doors to a traditional house in Marrakesh. Generally made from cedar wood and embellished with metal studs, the door knockers are crafted in brass or wrought iron and are now collector's items.

Right: Zellige tiles and carved plaster decorations adorn many a Moroccan riad.



rooms. The corners of the building are usually reserved for the kitchen and servants' quarters. With the advent of riads being converted to boutique hotels, modern considerations like air conditioning, small hammams (Turkish baths) and swimming pools have been added.

CENTURIES OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

My room has an intricately painted wooden ceiling (reminiscent of Indian havelis) called *zouaki*, a hearth and copper lanterns. The walls of the riads are adorned with tadelakt plaster, which is smooth and shiny, and zellige tiles, usually with Arabic calligraphy, with quotes from the Koran. Zellige—or glazed ceramic tiles in colourful geometric patterns—has its origins in 11th-century Fez. They are small hand-cut tiles made of local clay that are dipped into coloured enamel, baked, and arranged in geometric patterns with religious symbolism or complex astrology. As Islamic tradition forbids the representation of living figures in decorative arts, geometric or floral forms serve as the basis for the multifaceted designs. Zellige-making is considered

an art in itself, and this art is passed on from generation to generation.

Exquisite metalwork is another aspect of these traditional homes: pierced Moroccan lanterns that filter the light, copper sinks that gleam, door knockers that are individually handcrafted. The grills on the windows form the perfect counterpoint to the whitewashed walls and provide a screen of privacy to the people behind. The doors of riads are usually massive and made of cedar wood. Some doors are adorned with large, solid brass, cast iron or wooden knockers, while others are decorated with large, rounded nailheads and have decorative knockers. The knocker I see most often in the medina is the 'Hand of Fatima', which is considered to be a good-luck charm that wards off the evil eye.

A TREASURE TROVE OF WARMTH

Every riad has an identity based on the history and personality of its owner. It may not have some of the amenities offered by a hotel (such as a television, minibar or telephone) but it does offer



the full medina experience, often with a charming and knowledgeable host. There is some delicious local cuisine cooked by a *dada* (a Moroccan cook who knows the recipes of her ancestors), hammam treatments and excursions to small villages. What really differentiates a riad from a hotel is the attentive, personalised service by the staff—usually, the riad’s owner or manager greets you upon arrival and the staff offers you a welcoming glass of mint tea. Over the next few days, you

Above: A spacious bedroom in one of Fez’s traditional riads. The serenity of the accommodation makes many visitors feel right at home.

Below: This riad dining room in the city of Essaouira, Morocco, has classic low furniture and generic wall lights.

will experience warm Moroccan hospitality accentuated by thoughtful gestures that will stay in your heart forever.

Riads are often described by visitors as ‘diamonds in the rough’. Whether your riad is modern or traditional, this is one Moroccan experience that makes you feel right at home, with the good cheer of local culture and traditions. ■



QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways has daily direct flights to Brussels. From Brussels, you can take our codeshare partner Brussels Airlines to Madrid. From Madrid, you can take our interline partner Iberia Lineas Aereas De Espana S.A. to Marrakesh.

STAYING THERE

Stay at the Riad Dar Les Cigognes, a charming riad near the Jewish market that has stunning rooms furnished with traditional fabrics and designs and offers Moroccan cookery classes. You can alternatively stay at the Riad Kaiss, a stone’s throw from the Djemaa El Fna, a square in Marrakesh’s medina quarter. If you don’t mind splurging, the lavish Royal Mansour—the personal project of the King of Morocco—with its Andalusian courtyards, pools and riad-style town houses with silk-panelled walls is an excellent decision.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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